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UNCLAS WARSAW 01679

SIPDIS
CXWARSAW:
ACTION: ECON
INFO: FCS DCM ADM MGT ORA POL AMB PAS

DISSEMINATION: ECOX
CHARGE: PROG

APPROVED: ECON:RRORVIG
DRAFTED: ECON:MKATULA
CLEARED: NONE

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FM AMEMBASSY WARSAW
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1644
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEHKW/AMCONSUL KRAKOW 1260
RUEHLN/AMCONSUL ST PETERSBURG 0015
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 WARSAW 001679

SIPDIS
SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR EUR/NCE DKOSTELANCIK AND MSESSUMS, DEPT FOR EUR/RS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [ECON](#) [EWWT](#) [SENV](#) [PREL](#) [RS](#) [PL](#)
SUBJECT: POLAND: GOVERNMENT PLAN TO CARVE CHANNEL ON POLISH
SIDE OF VISTULA SPIT RILES ENVIRONMENTALISTS

REF: WARSAW 1001

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1. (U) Summary. Reftel describes the intermittent quarrels between the GOP and the Kaliningrad authorities and Moscow over ship access to the Baltisk Strait, which is the only point of entry into the Vistula Bay, and is located in Russian territory. As a result, the Polish city of Elblag and the surrounding coastal towns must effectively rely on the Russians for direct sea access to the Baltic. The GOP has now devised a plan to dig a canal through the Polish portion of the Vistula Spit, obviating the need for the GOP to work with the Russians to rewrite the current and increasingly ineffective bilateral agreement dating from 1946. The plan has some Polish environmentalists and local government authorities upset at the possibility that the project will damage both land and aquatic ecosystems.

Security and Commercial Development

2. (U) The project to dig a ship canal through the narrow but forested Vistula Spit was devised by the regional government of the Warminsko-Mazurskie province and the municipal government of Elblag (130,000 inhabitants), which is located on the shore of the Vistula Bay opposite the Spit. The project gained support of the Minister for Maritime Affairs, Rafal Wiechecki, has been approved by the GOP's Council of Ministers, and has been added to the GOP's infrastructure and development plan. According to plans,

work on the canal will begin in 2008, will be completed by 2010, and will carry a price tag of 60 million Euro. The GOP will reportedly seek funding from both the EU and NATO, indicating the GOP justifies the project in terms of both commercial and strategic merit. The city of Elblag views the canal as its chance to develop into a major port city in terms of both tourism and commerce.

Arguments Against the Canal

13. (U) Opposition to the Vistula Spit canal comes mainly from ecologists and the local government of Krynica Morska, a small town and very popular tourist destination situated on the Vistula Spit. The proposed canal would be dug to the west of Krynica Morska, separating the town from the mainland. Local officials, including the mayor, fear the canal will complicate access to the town and will lead to subsequent lost tourist revenue. They also argue that the Vistula Bay is too shallow to ever permit heavy ship traffic into Elblag - in which case the economic development argument in favor of the canal becomes irrelevant. Ecologists argue that a canal will increase the salinity level of the Vistula Bay and will disturb the nesting grounds of countless bird species, which currently stop on the isolated Spit to breed. Among the many species present is the rare black stork. Some environmentalists have pledged to take their case to the EU, as the area where the canal would be dug is part of the EU's Nature 2000 environmental protection scheme. Pro-canal voices counter these arguments, noting that studies were done in the past that revealed salinity levels would not change due to canal building. They also note that a bridge would be built over the canal to provide adequate access from the Polish mainland to Krynica Morska.

On the Heels of Rospuda

14. (U) The outcry over the proposed canal comes only weeks after another economic development project, the Rospuda bypass, triggered a national debate about balancing environmental concerns with economic development. The Rospuda Valley is a wetland area, also in the Warminsko-Mazurskie province, which is also included in Nature 2000. The remote and beautiful wetland is found near the city of Augustow, a through point for large amounts of heavy truck traffic. Unfortunately, the roads running through Augustow were not built to accommodate the current traffic volume, which results in traffic jams and road safety problems - there have been many fatalities on Augustow roads attributed to heavy truck traffic. Just as construction was about to begin on the Rospuda bypass, which provides for a heavy duty concrete road suspended above the Rospuda wetland, well over 100,000 Poles signed petitions against the project and many famous citizens took public stands against it. Opponents point out that the bypass could be built only a few kilometers to the west, which would avoid putting the road through the wetland entirely. This option is a less facile one for the GOP, as there are scores of landowners with whom the GOP would have to negotiate for land rights. The Rospuda Valley, on the other hand, is state-held land. Due to its designation as protected wetland, EU funding is not available for the project, which is another rallying point for its opponents.

15. (SBU) Comment. Both the Rospuda Valley bypass and the Vistula Spit canal project, regardless of their merits, are most likely foreshadowing for the type public debate pitting development against environment that is likely to become more common as Poland's infrastructure continues to grow, especially as more EU funding pours into the country. While these two projects are perhaps not the best illustrations (one of our highly-placed PiS contacts told us the Rospuda project was unwise and poorly conceived), the drive to make Poland's vast forests and wetlands accessible to both domestic and foreign tourists, and the drive to make Polish

infrastructure more conducive to commercial activity, will inevitably involve cutting trees and laying concrete, thus raising the ire of environmentalists.

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